

Interview with Seymour Hersh by Peter Jennings on A.M. America, 3/20/75

(Tape begins while Hersh answers first question)

....and they (CIA) went around trying to convince the publishing industry, the newspaper industry that it hadn't been blown, that the L.A. Times didn't write it, the Russians didn't know about it. You know, it had already been published, the L.A. Times story about the break-in and the CIA operation ~~XXX~~ were published in New York and all over the world.

J: ~~XXXXXXX~~ Isn't it very difficult to imagine that the Soviet Union would not have known what was going on out there?

H: Yeah, sure.

J: And what's the big deal about all of this?

H: I never thought it was that big. I thought--think it's a laugh riot. It always reminds me of the Tom Lear (?) joke about Werner von Brown, he aimed for the moon but often hit London, you know, with his missiles, you know, they tried something pretty interesting and if it worked we probably would have said "Cool". We might not have. I don't know what I would think--if I had been an American what I would think if the Russians came by and picked up the Thresher (?), remember the American submarine that went down off New Hampshire, and buried some of our dead at sea. I wonder if I'd ask questions like, hey, we're so worried about the missing in action in SE Asia did we give the Russians a list of who was dead? So they can tell their families about it. You know, it raises these kind of questions.

J: It raises some other questions too about this whole campaign that's surrounding the CIA now. There's the automatic reaction on Congress about those who said they weren't in it. Of course the oversight committee was. There's the involvement of the press and why Colby went around town telling that he wouldn't like to publish the story. Why do you think that he did?

H: I think they're all in grave trouble and I think they realize it. I think we're going to see the end of the initials "CIA". I think we're still going to have an intelligence function but we're going to have to have different initials. You know there was a story out of London the other day telling that the London government, or some members of Parliament were going to oust members of the CIA who are under cover--

J: Who are working--

H: Everybody knows we've been doing that for ~~XXXX~~ 25 years. The president of Mexico, (name) the other day was denouncing the CIA and the CIA knew he was president before he did, I mean we had an awful lot to do with that election and the control. You know we've had--Mexico's always been a side pocket of ours. So when our own flesh and blood start denouncing us, England, Mexico, its value is gone, I think. And so here's the CIA--you want to avoid as much--you want to get the stuff you want to pick it up to show everybody you can do useful things. I think it would have been reasonably useful to have it.

probably

J: Do you think all the coverage that's been given to it has been kind of queered going back next summer?

H: Oh yeah. If they want to go back they might as well invite the Russians to go with them and make it a joint venture. I mean look, one of the things--we go into space jointly, why not go down there? You know, we're not two scorpions in a bottle any more. The trouble is the boys over there, the pickle factory as they sometimes say the CIA, they like to think this is 1953, but it's not; it's 75.

J: I noticed that in your article and certainly in others this has

been--the ramifications of this have been at least compared to the U-2 that it is possible this might queer detente (unintelligible). Do you believe that?

H: No, detente's much more important than this. The two countries really want to do something about the money and arms race, etc., this is an episode, this is an incident.

J: Do you think the CIA is rapidly becoming outmoded? What will become of it, what should replace it?

H: Oh, I don't know. They'll just get something else with different initials. "NIS", National Intelligence Service. I think the old initials are gonna have to go.

J: Why Howard Hughes involved in this?

H: Well, I'll tell you, one of the things that bothered me about not publishing this story, one of the reasons, I honestly believe the CIA wanted this for what they believed to be valid security--national security reasons. I disagree with it, but you could I think also give them their point. I don't think they had any gains. To them getting a 1958 submarine was manna. I don't...uh...I was bothered by the Hughes angle. ~~XXXXX~~ All during Watergate, we now discover, publication of a story a few days ago, the White House had a reason to be worried about Howard Hughes. You know, of course, that Howard Hunt, E. Howard Hunt--I'm beginning to sound like a Kennedy Assassination nut, a UFO, I'll start talking about these next, but anyway (laughs), the point is that Howard Hunt, the convicted watergate burglar, ex-CIA guy, was working for a Hughes public relations firm, uh, and, uh, you wonder about that. You wonder about all this talk about, oh, Larry O'Brien, the guy they were wiretapping also had done some public relations work for Hughes, and here's ~~XXXXXX~~ Hughes working on a project we described--the papers described as the most secret of the Ford and Nixon administrations. You wonder what impact this had on any way the President or people in the White House or people in the government who were briefed on the program would have gone.

(Commercial break--back joined by Bill Beutel (sp?):

B: I'd like to ask you, Mr. Hersh, one of the things behind this is the proper role of the press in a story of this sort. Apparently the newspapers knew a long time--I'm not going to ask you how long you specifically knew about it, but a lot of people did know about this and held it back. Now, so many people say we don't think in the press about the interests of the country. What do you think is the proper role of the press in a story like this?

H: Well, just generally I think the role of the press is to..is to find out, and it's the role of the government to keep it secret, and I think one of the problems happens when the press finds out something like this and the government says no, keep it secret. It's a very important clash because after all, we end up in a position of becoming part of national security, ~~becoming~~ part of decision making. Whether we publish it has something to do with whether the boat goes out--the CIA goes out and tries to get the rest of the submarine. I'm afraid I take a pretty hard line on it. I probably should have published the story right away. I made that...uh, I'm a reporter (unintelligible) and if I didn't think that there'd be something wrong with me. I also can understand and respect the decision of the editors of the Times and other newspapers not to publish it on grounds that it's a continuing operation, on grounds that the CIA made a personal appeal to them, suggested also that men's lives could be endangered. The way we left it at the Times, I and the managing editor, A.M. Rosenthal, was that it was up to me to keep on working on it and find reasons for him to publish the story above and beyond the reasons for not publishing it given to him by Mr.

Colby.

J: One thing that was interesting, though, in some instances Colby apparently asked people ~~XX~~ not to publish the story who hadn't heard the full details of the story. Why that?

H: What's even more enraging is that he, you know, I have known about some details of this ~~XXXX~~ operation for a long time. I really didn't begin working on it until about 6 or 8 weeks ago, and I got, I would get enraged to find out he was briefing people on something I had been digging out. He was just giving them briefings. And on one of them, not this one, and others. He would drive around and visit their offices and I know at least one Senator who was furious about it...uh...to be honest it's Senator Symington, was quite angry about the idea, you know newspaper men aren't exactly notorious national security keepers of secrets, you know, we talk.

J: (laughs) right.

H: So I thought what he did was counterproductive and frankly almost ~~almost~~ immature.

B: If Jack Andersen had not gone on the radio the other night and released this story how long do you think this story would have been kept secret?

H: Uh...I think it was on, everybody in town was hearing it. There was a fellow named Charles Morgan of the ACLU here in Washington who was making it his number one objective to get the story published and he said that if the American press would let the CIA tell it what to do, he said he was gonna do whatever he could, even publish it in the ACLU journal. So I don't think it would have stayed secret very long. Too many people knew about it. It was a ridiculous idea once the Los Angeles Times broke the story and told enough of the facts so that the Russians certainly knew. I think then what you do is you throw in the towel, you don't go trying to put it back in the jar.

J: Can I ask for a second what the CIA should be doing in your view? You talked earlier about what you thought might replace it. You wrote extensively on the story about spying on Americans, now we have this one. We've had Chile ad infinitum. What should the CIA be doing, in your view?

H: Well I think right now it should be spending a lot more time cooperating with Congressional committees and the White House in their various investigations and shouldn't be in a position, as Mr. Colby was a month ago, of having to tell Congress they've destroyed files when they've assured others they haven't, ~~me~~ I included ~~when~~ I wrote my first story. So I think the CIA has a terrific role in analyzing and providing assessments of intelligence information, looking at the satellite data, providing a counterpoint to the military opinions on intelligence. We certainly need an objective--a non-military, let's put it, oriented intelligence community and the CIA certainly does a good job on that. But it's really a schizophrenic thing. On one side it's the intelligence side; on the other side it's the operational side, and I frankly think if the CIA in 1970 or 71 had gone to a committee that wasn't composed of patsies like most of the watchdog committees are--there's no other word for them--and laid out this whole operation, I think somebody would have looked at the cost benefit and said what the hell are you gonna get out of a diesel engine. You know, I was convinced it was nuclear powered.

B: That's a point that you raised. Senator Church said yesterday the CIA should be held to a cost-~~XXXX~~ benefit ratio, which I think is translated into more colloquial terms, more bang for the buck. Can intelligence be held together that way? Can you really look at intelligence on a cost-benefit ratio?

H: Well what do you--what are you gonna find on a submarine that was built in '58 that may have been modified. What are they gonna have

for you. You know the code book...uh...maybe not. Look, that's one of the great debates, and as a journalist and somebody who's basically very antagonistic these days to the intelligence gathering operation on the basis of first hand experience with nothing but lies, really, and distrusts--not from Colby; I think Colby's been quite honorable, and the people around him right now. But from the predecessors and others there that bunch of guys I think we simply have to put to a higher standard. We have to put the intelligence community to the same standard we would to a group wanting to put more food stamps out.

J: Cy, thank you very much for coming. Nice having you.

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